DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 106 HE 028 514

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TITLE Assisting Higher Education Professors with Multicultural Classroom Challenges.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southern States Communication Association (65th, New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; *College Programs; Computer Networks; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Pluralism; *Faculty Development; Higher Education; Multicultural Education; Program Development; Seminars; Teleconferencing; Videotape Recordings
IDENTIFIERS Faculty Attitudes; Internet; *Middle Tennessee State University

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ongoing effort at Middle Tennessee State University to involve teaching faculty in the exploration of issues surrounding the growing diversity in the campus population. It discusses the background and rationale for the project, planning phases, and implementation. An orientation session was developed, centered on presentation of "The Intercultural Classroom, A Different Place," a video docudrama produced by the Intercultural Resources Corporation. Response to the orientation session was negligible, drawing mainly faculty with an interest in communications or intercultural and international affairs. A three-tiered plan of action was then developed which included activities within the college of liberal arts, campus-wide involvement, and several nationally-grounded exercises. These included nationwide teleconferences, Internet discussion lists, campus cultural and diversity activities, and department meetings on multiculturalism. Suggestions for program improvement are discussed. (MDM)

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ED 386 106

ASSISTING HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSORS

WITH

MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM CHALLENGES

Presented at the Sixty-Fifth Annual Convention of the Southern States Communication Association held in New Orleans, April 5 - 9, 1995.

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ASSISTING HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSORS WITH MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM CHALLENGES

Introduction

This paper is a report on an ongoing effort to involve teaching faculty in exploration of issues surrounding the growing diversity in the campus population at Middle Tennessee State University. The project has been undertaken as an internship assignment with the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and the objective has been to promote professional growth of faculty in the College. In this paper I shall present information on the background and rationale for the project, describe stages of planning, and discuss various levels of activity in project implementation. Concluding remarks will highlight lessons learned from the effort, and offer recommendations that may be applied to enhance effectiveness with similar initiatives.

Background to the project

The year - long position in which I am serving is one of several internships established for the pursuit of various projects deemed beneficial to the advancement of the goals of the College of Liberal Arts. My project fell under the general area of faculty development, and was designed to promote a specific aspect of professional growth of the

faculty. Traditionally, concerns about professional growth of faculty generally interpret assisting faculty with the promotion and tenure processes. My project, focusing on the challenges of teaching in the multicultural classroom, has extended this scope of interpretation.. The extension was justified by the argument that faculty play their role more effectively if they accept a responsibility to promote the academic achievement of all students by learning to recognize and manage cultural factors that frequently intrude into the teaching - learning process.

Several considerations led to the selection of this focus for my project. First, I have been keenly interested in the national dialogue on issues of diversity on college campuses. In 1994 The National Endowment for the Humanities, under the Chairmanship of Sheldon Hackney, promoted the topic through several media channels and encouraged participation by all institutions of higher learning. I believed the internship put me in a position where I could contribute to the effort by getting some of our faculty engaged on the issue. Secondly, the topic relates directly to my primary professional interests which revolve around the promotion of intercultural understanding.

Philosophical justification for adoption of this focus also came from opinions expressed by national leaders of academe. In the published report of the Wingspread Conference on Higher Education held in 1993, principal architects of American higher education took American Universities to task for not responding quickly enough in two

critical areas which have been projected to continue changing rapidly into the tweny-first century; changes in the technological and human aspects of the environment. In discussing the theme of a changing America and a changing world, the imperative from the Conference (p.4) was that American Institutions of Higher Education need to *"educate more people, educate them to far higher standards, and do it as effectively and efficiently as possible."*

Further justification for the project came from the stated mission of our University which includes the assertion that *cultural diversity in the student body and among University Personnel is important to the University.* The statement also expresses a commitment to *provide students with exposure ... to the characteristics of a changing contemporary world.* Figures from the MTSU Office of Institutional Research show a steady growth in recent years in the numbers of minority and foreign born persons in the campus population. More aggressive recruitment programs have resulted in increased enrollments of students from underrepresented groups. The university has also developed several affiliation programs with foreign Universities. While all this has made for a more stimulating learning environment and an exciting campus, rumors and incidents of intercultural clashes have indicated that adjustments to these demographic changes are proving to be difficult for the community.

Project Planning

Preliminary planning for the year-long project delineated three main phases of

implementation as follows:

> Phase One: A preparatory phase of exploration; canvassing opinion of faculty in the College of Liberal Arts about areas of concern on issues related to teaching effectiness and professional growth.
>
> Phase Two: Organizing forums to engage faculty in dialogue over identified issues and gain information that would guide development of subsequent delivery options.
>
> Phase Three: Preparing a report on the outcomes of phase two activities; crystallizing from that exercise recommendations for training and development packages to be implemented by the College.

This outline of the project was only tentative at this stage, allowing for specific details and modifications to be made as events began to unfold. As will be explained later, this preliminary plan changed quite dramatically in actual implementation.

I began the search for ideas and materials to use on the project well before the beginning of the school session in August. Contacts with the University's Office of Multicultural Affairs yielded some insight on University-wide efforts already underway. That Office helps to coordinate efforts of the University's Multi-Cultural Policies Committee, and had previously submitted a proposal to the President, recommending implementation of Multicultural Diversity Training workshops for various segments of the campus community. The Director of the Office was interested in preparing an instrument that could be used, at some appropriate time, to reliably measure the campus climate on multiculralism. The

discovery of the scope of this Office's work effectively nullified my phase one plan, leading me to extend the application phases of the project. I therefore expanded the plan to include the offering of training opportunities, provided that these could be arranged within the limited budget allocations which cover all the internships operated by the Dean's office.

Other ideas and resources came from connections I made over the internet with personnel working on diversity matters at other institutions round the country. From discussions with these colleagues I soon learned that no two programs are alike in every way. . I was going to have to identify the particular needs of my campus population, and address those. Having so confirmed the prudence of my phase two proposal, I adopted this as the actual first phase of implementation, and began to outline this stage of the plan in greater detail. The fact-finding stage had to be completed early, and I quickly set about selecting material that I found interesting and stimulating as a way to entice faculty attention. While these seemed to be sound decisions at the time, they led to what turned out to be a false start to the program; resulting in a significant extension of the planning phase.

Planning Extension

From the outset it was recognized that there would be scheduling difficulties in organizing College-wide activities for faculty. This was unavoidable. Acceptance of this fact meant making efforts to coordinate scheduling with the University Calendar, and adjusting expectations on attendance. I reasoned that I should offer faculty an engaging and

stimulating experience at the program kick-off event. After reviewing several options I selected "The Intercultural Classroom, A Different Place", a video docudrama put out by the Intercultural Resource Corporation of Boston. Early in the semester I sent out a memo inviting faculty to the event, which was scheduled for the second week of the semester in an attractive, well equipped classroom in the state of the art Mass Communications building. Screenings were scheduled for two consecutive afternoons, and I also prepared a brief questionnaire asking faculty to indicate what types of activities they would welcome, when, and how sessions should be conducted, etc.

Response was negligible. Clearly, the memo as a primary form of invitation, lacked drawing power, and I was going to have to do more groundwork to get people to come out and join the conversation. I noted that those who came were colleagues with declared interests in communication or intercultural/international affairs, or those involved in planning for development of the College. From the discussions and responses on the questionnaire I gathered that those who came thought the theme was worthwhile, and that the suggested follow-up activities were appropriate. I suspected however, that these opinions were probably not representative of the majority of College faculty, so I searched for insights to guide me towards reaching the wider group of College faculty.

I found it instructive that all respondents to my questionnaire had opted for workshop, or discussion oriented forms of presentations. I was also struck by comments

that some of the faculty were probably embarrassed by the topic and uncomfortable about discussing issues of difference publicly. I also discovered that some faculty harbored negative associations for words such as 'multiculturalism'. Clearly, I was going to have to address those concerns in safer, more intimate contexts, before I could hope to draw people into a wider scope of dialogue. In a follow-up meeting with the Dean it was decided that the Chairs could probably offer insights on ways to gain faculty involvement and overcome what resistance there may be to developing discourse on diversity.

I had opportunity to raise the subject with the Chairs at a Chairs' meeting where I also screened the video that I had selected to show the faculty. Follow-up came in rounds of meetings with individual Chairs to plan for ways of g aining access to faculty. Meetings were easier to schedule with those departments that meet regularly, much more difficulty to manage with those that did not. In order to reach faculty in those departments another forum had to be opened up. Here I sought the assistance of Professor Jill Hague who was also serving an internship in Faculty Development. She scheduled me to present to faculty on the brown-bag lunch series she was organizing for later in the semester.

At the end of the extended planning period a three-tiered plan of action for my project emerged. The plan has included activities within the College, campus-wide involvement, and some nationally grounded exercises. Work on all three levels of involvement is ongoing and interrelated. Highlights of implementation at each of these

levels is presented in the next section of the paper.

Project Implementation

A - Nationally-grounded Activities

Throughout this period of internship I have maintained a strong consciousness of the national scope of the discourse. To maintain this broadened perspective I found it helpful to make connections with persons involved in similar initiatives in other educational institutions around the country. Fo myself, the most expedient means of maintaining these connections has been through the internet, where I have joined and participate in discussion groups with other academics who are focused on these issues.

First I joined DIVERS-L, a discussion group on diversity issues subscribed to by individuals from all over the world. The most active participants on the list are been from the US and Canada, and largely drawn from academe. Several list members are administrators in charge of the 'multicultural' or 'diversity' portfolios on their campuses. Members have been very generous in sharing ideas, resources, and pointers. A posting on the DIVERS-L list led me to what has evolved into the MULTC-ED list, a discussion group for multicultural education faculty. Participants on this list include members of the National Association of Multicultural Educators. This has been a particularly lively list, reflecting the overflow of stimulation members received from the recently held national conference of NAME. From that list I have lately become subscribed to the related

AFFAM-L list, a discussion group for advocates for affirmative action. This has also been a very active group with subscribers engaged in constructing a coherent platform from which to counter current efforts to abolish the principle of affirmative action. At every opportunity I have shared ideas gathered through these national connections with my College audiences, thereby reinforcing their awareness of involvement in a national dialogue.

College faculty have also had opportunity for more direct involvement through participation in several nationwide teleconferences which the University's Department of Continuing Education has periodically provided the campus community. The teleconferences which I found to be most directly related to my project are as follows:

1. "Look Who's Coming to College," - examined characteristics of current college student populations around the country.
2. "Contemporary Gender Relations on Campus," - examined sexuality issues raised by diversity in student populations.
3. "Teleconference on Institutional Effectiveness" - served to underscore the merit of my project by emphasizing the value of continual assessment and improvement efforts.
4. "Teleconference on Diversifying the Curriculum" - examined the value of, and offered instruction on adapting the curriculum to include contributions from underrepresented sources.

B - Campus - wide Activities

Several campus-wide events available to College faculty during this period have effectively bridged the distance between the nationally grounded and college centered areas of involvement. Particularly useful in this regard have bben the discussions that followed the telecast conferences. The "Look Who is Coming to College" teleconference prompted a look at our student population that corroborated findings from the national survey that the population has grown increasingly diverse in the last decade. Indeed, it was observed that the 'traditional' student has become the exception on the MTSU campus. The teleconference on "Contemporary Gender Relationships on Campus" highlighted sexual issues that have arisen from increasing diversity in campus populations. Participants in the follow-up discussion commented at length on the climate for tolerance at MTSU. Reports and narratives from individuals who have been on campus for many years indicated remarkable changes over the last decade or so on the level of intimidation experienced by women and 'different others' on the campus.

The consciousness raising effects of my in-house activities received expansion at certain campus-wide events that Liberal Arts faculty have been encouraged to attend during this period. These have included special programs presented over the months of February and March in recognition of Black History Month and Women's History Month celebrations. In a similar vein, the entire campus community has been invited to participate in the International Culture Week "95 currenly running throughout the week of April 3 - 5.

This celebration of diversity in international culture is featuring a rich array of events such as bazaars, art displays, seminars, receptions and teas, and a closing banquet offering international culinary delights and entertainment.

Of these open campus-wide events, the one most focused on this project is a day-long workshop on Intercultural Communication which I and the Chair of the Journalism Department will be conducting in April to promote interest in cross-cultural interaction on the campus. Titled "Crossing Cultures Successfully," the workshop is being sponsored by the Committee for Global Studies at MTSU and supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The workshop program has been designed to satisfy some of the interests earlier expressed by Liberal Arts faculty, and these faculty will be specially invited to participate in whatever parts of the day-long event they can accommodate on their schedules.

C - <u>In-house Activities</u>

In-house presentations to Departmental groups have been quite successful in stimulating involvement in the discourse on the multicultural classroom. These presentations have been scheduled within usual faculty meeting times, in an attempt to reach those faculty who would not voluntarily go out of their way to explore topics on multiculturalism. The most immediately felt problem presented by this maneuver has been that some meeting sessions have been significantly extended. Consequently, whenever I am not scheduled

early enough in the proceedings, I have found it necessary to modify and/or accelerate the pace of events in my segment of the agenda

My basic format of presentation has been to give a short introductory talk explaining the project purpose and the upcoming situation in the docudrama. Then I screen the videos, and give a brief summary to focus the discussion that follows. After a few runs I found it expedient to show material from only one of the tapes in the "Intercultural Classroom set, replacing the recorded discussion by experts with more discussion time for the faculty groups in attendance.

The material has generated a wide range of responses within the departmental groups. It would appear that faculty are more relaxed and able to express themselves quite freely in the company of departmental colleagues. I have found the atmosphere to be even more conducive at those departmental gatherings where food and refreshments are available to the group. Most participants have tended to relate easily to the situation in the videotape, and many have been moved to share personal accounts of similar experiences. There have been instances , however, when a viewer seems to get stuck in the 'international' character of the material, requiring explicit explanations to aid transposition into an understanding of the mix of cultures that exists in the domestic society. On a few occasions I have encountered emphatic denials of the reality of diversity within our student population. Not surprisingly, information I offered in response to these positions generally failed to shake

these individuals of their convictions. I have welcomed these expressions of skepticism, however, since they have served as evidence of my success in creating an atmosphere at these gatherings where dissenters have felt free to express their opinions. Such brief skirmishes notwithstanding, all of the presentations have concluded with expressions of interest in future explorations of the subject, with faculty consistently indicating a preference for the workshop format for follow-up presentations.

The Brown-bag Series of presentations and discussions instituted by Jill Hague, intern on Faculty Development, provided another avenue through which I could reach those faculty with whom department group meetings have been difficult to schedule. Since the forum draws participants across disciplines, discussion here produces a cross-pollination of ideas and creative insights in analyses of issues. The availability of this alternative venue also made it mandatory for me to work up some level of variety in my offerings. I therefore selected an additional videotape titled "Dealing with Diversity in the Classroom" which is circulated by the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, and used this in departments where members may have had opportunity to see the first video. This longer, more extensive instructional tool has received mixed reviews, however. The high school context which is the backdrop used in the material has proved to be quite problematic for some viewers. Some faculty have remained detached from the context despite the introductory preface that I provide before screening which includes an orientation to the setting and the argument that the students in the tape represent the

population that colleges regularly inherit from high schools. The tape also includes several 'how to' sections which some faculty have resented, triggering comments about 'political correctness' and other distortions of the discourse.

Concluding Remarks

In concluding this report, I wish to highlight a few of the lessons I have learned from this experience which should be helpful to anyone who undertakes a similar project. To begin with, the project plan should be kept flexible, with lots of room for modifications to be made as necessary. In implementation, it is desirable to develop a diverse offering of activities which can be made available on a flexible schedule to encourage a wide breadth of participation. The administrator should adopt a coactive approach, inviting suggestions and staying open to ideas and feedback from participants.

Institutional support is essential, and this can take several forms. Seek out and establish a network with administrators in other offices that are engaged in promoting multicultural awareness. These may include The Director of the Office of International Programs and Scholars, the Dean of Student Affairs, the Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Director of the Global Studies Program. Care should be taken, however, to not step on toes or encroach on others' territorial areas of responsibility. Supportive messages from Chairs and the Dean will reinforce credibility and is crucial for securing faculty compliance.

Look for support from colleagues in other institutions who are engaged on similar efforts. I found my internet contacts invaluable here. There are also professional organizations such as the National Association of Multicultural Educators through which one can establish a valuable network of contacts. Take advantage of opportunities that offer wide and immediate connection such as the national teleconferences.

Finally, be prepared to measure success in modest terms. For me, it has been enough to see colleagues simply engaging in discussion. Follow-up notes I have received from some faculty have been an additional source of gratification, including even the one that said "Thanks a lot Regina. Now you've made my job even more complicated!"

Diversity on the college campus is a good thing; it stimulates creativity and broadens understanding and implementation of scholarship. Acknowledgement and support of this diversity continues to be a difficult challenge, however, for many who have not been trained to cope with it. Faculty are not alone in this regard. One of the points which I frequently stress to my audiences is my conviction that the challenges posed by multiculturalism need to be addressed by all segments of the campus community. Students too need sustained support in learning to adjust and adapt to the different others they must live, learn and interact with in and outside the classroom. Students, do get some degree of preparation through orientation programs. Frequently, however, faculty get none, and are often not inclined to take advantage of such training when it is offered. Many claim to have learned

how to effectively manage diversity from 'experience,' unaware of the extent to which the approaches they have adopted are imbued with the unconscious assumptions of their own enculturation.

This initiative to assist liberal arts faculty at MTSU address the challenges of the multicultural classroom is accomplishing the basic goal of enhancing faculty awareness of issues that surround the reality of diversity in the campus population. This very modest level of accomplishment may be satisfying if the project is appreciated as an effort that will continue to yield results over time, even though the project will end at the close of the academic session. I believe that the heightened level of consciousness established by this initiative will continue to grow now that College faculty more readily recognize ways in which cross-cultural influences affect dynamics of interaction within their classrooms as well as within the wider system of the campus community.

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